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What's Love Got To Do With It?

A Personal Reflection on the Role of Maternal Love in Feminist Teaching

To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice. (bell hooks, 2000: xxix)

Mothering/nurturing is a vital force and process establishing relationships throughout the universe. (Bernice Johnson Reagon, 1986: 88)

Conceiving and birthing my son over fourteen years ago when I was a Women's Studies graduate student transformed me. Just as I can not separate my feminism from any part of my life, I am unable to sever being a mother from any aspect of myself. As a result, my education, research and teaching are intertwined with my experience, knowledge and positioning as a feminist mother. At this point in time, I am interested in investigating how this positioning and my experiences may be useful in developing a theory of maternal-feminist pedagogy.

Like Sara Ruddick's (1989) *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* and Susan Wendell's (1989) "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," I situate my exploration in the general philosophical view that distinctive ways of knowing arise out of and are tested against our lived, everyday practices.¹ Both Ruddick, as a mother, and Wendell, as a woman living with a disability, have generated theories from their personal and lived experiences. I take a similar practicalist approach by drawing upon my own experiences of mothering, research and teaching to explore the potential of developing a theory of maternal-feminist pedagogy that integrates elements of maternal practice, love and feminist teaching.

In this paper, I introduce a series of snapshots that represent personal

moments of scrutiny regarding the intersection of my feminism, mothering, research and teaching. To some degree, these illustrations are milestones in my development as a feminist mother and as a feminist teacher.² They are also significant moments that have contributed to my thinking about the role of maternal practice, and in particular the role of love, in feminist teaching. The purpose of this composition is to begin a discussion about the role love may have in feminist teaching and the possibility of developing a theory that integrates elements of maternal thinking with components of feminist pedagogy. I invite others to join this inquiry and to pursue further discussion around this proposition.

The personal is political: Living the intricacies of feminism, mothering and research

I first became aware of the fundamental interconnectedness of my feminism, mothering and research in 1988, when I was pregnant and writing my MA thesis “The Development of a Mother-Centred Model of Childbirth.” Not only did my experiences of conception and pregnancy kindle the choice and development of my research topic, the process of investigating and writing my thesis enabled me to make meaningful connections among my life experiences, my feminist analysis and my feminist activism. For example, while still pregnant, I decided to hyphenate my son’s last name to honour both his maternal and paternal ancestry.³ I did not want to sustain or reproduce the patriarchal practice of naming children exclusively after their paternal lineage. Rather, I wanted to ensure that my child’s maternal family line was visible. Through the act of choosing and registering my son’s name, I learned how mothering can be a site of political activism.

As my child developed, I realized, for the first time, how males, just as females, are under immense pressure to conform to restrictive gender specific stereotypes. This was most obvious to me in 1993, when my son entered kindergarten. At this time, I was overtly pressured by other mothers to explain and “correct” the appearance of my five-year-old son, whose hairstyle more closely resembled that of a girl than that of a boy. I was not prepared for the intense social pressure to raise my son in ways that replicate patriarchal notions of masculinity. I knew, however, that fighting to create space for my son, where he could grow and develop in ways that were comfortable and appropriate for him, was essential to my love for him as a mother and integral to my feminism.

These early revelations—that mothering can be a site of feminist activism, that the socialization and development of males are influenced by patriarchy and that mothers are strongly prompted to reproduce and advocate patriarchal expectations—now appear naive. They were, however, significant to the inception of my PhD research that I would soon begin. My experiences made me want to investigate how other self-identified feminist mothers experienced the interconnection of their feminism and mothering.

Mothering and teaching: Curricula and student interaction

My mothering experiences not only concurred with and, consequently, sculpted my research, they also corresponded with and influenced my teaching. In 1989, with an MA degree in hand and a one-year-old in my life, I began teaching an introductory level Women's Studies course. Being a "new mom" significantly influenced the decisions I made about the content of the course. I spent considerable time developing the curriculum and fostering class discussion in ways that focused on issues connected to the family. I paid particular attention to the inequalities related to gender socialization, to the complexities of developing positive self-esteem in children, to the devaluation of motherwork, and to the significance of women and mothers in the lives of the children they care for.

In the following ten years I taught courses in both Sociology and Women's Studies as a stipendiary and, then, sessional instructor. My identity as a mother continued to guide my curricula and teaching practices. Issues related to mothering were fundamental to early Sociology courses addressing 'women in society' and 'sex and gender relations,' and continue to be a prominent feature in the "Sociological Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality" course I am currently teaching. Being a mother also advises the various Women's Studies courses that I have developed and taught, including two on "gender and the sciences." Investigation into historical and philosophical approaches to science are directed through several lenses, including one that focuses on assumptions made about women, mothers and the realities of mothering. Exploration into contemporary gender issues related to science, such as women's health and the environment, are also informed by a critique of myths associated with women who are mothers.

As a parent, I am acutely sensitive to issues and concerns particular to students who are mothers. I am mindful of the difficulty they may have in attending class or meeting homework deadlines due to the complexities of motherwork, which may include: caring for ill children; dealing with unpredictable childcare arrangements; or managing a multitude of other family responsibilities. I also respect and acknowledge the importance of mothering in the approaches students take in their discussions, analysis and assignments. For example, in a seminar on Feminist Research Methodologies, two students (who are not parents) are currently working on projects connected with mothering; one on lesbian parenting and the other on mother/child bonding. My openness to and support of their interest in research associated with mothering encourages them to see me as a useful resource as both a mother and a professor. I am able to help them address many of the questions they have about the topic of mothering and assist them in deciding which approach(es) they want to pursue while investigating their subject areas.

According to my students, being the parent of an adolescent affords me a particular astuteness to issues associated with sexuality and sex-related illness and disease. They often ask me how I deal with these issues in my relationship

with my now teen-aged son. In 2001, when Winnipeg School Division #1 held public meetings to discuss a new anti-homophobia policy and a revised school curriculum, students raised the issue of the lack of openness around issues of sex in their own high school education and the negative repercussions this has for youth coming to terms with themselves as sexual beings. Currently, my perspective and experience as a feminist mother continues to be sought after in class discussions on how to effectively talk with children, youth, adults and parents about sexuality and issues related to the rights and struggles of transgendered people.

Feminism and teaching: Feminist pedagogy in the classroom

I begin all of my classes, regardless of the faculty in which I teach, by introducing students to the article “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” by Carolyn M. Shrewsbury (1987). Together we explore the goal of working together to create a liberatory classroom environment where we can learn to respect each other’s differences—whether they are differences of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, age, and/or ability—rather than fear them. Central to this vision is integrating the skills of critical thinking about the many forms of oppression and domination with respect for others. My desire, like Shrewsbury’s, is to create a classroom that “becomes a place in which integrity is not only possible but normal” (1987: 6).

To help create such a space, I nurture an understanding and practice of community, empowerment and leadership that is student-centred and democratic (Shrewsbury, 1987: 8). How we imagine community within the classroom will influence the ways in which we construct systems of power among ourselves and, in turn, shape how people participate, learn and teach within that space. Central to this practice is (re)envisioning the classroom as a community of diverse learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others that coincides with the developmental needs of the participants, no matter what their identity (Shrewsbury, 1987: 10).

Empowerment embodies an understanding and practice of power as energy, capacity and potential rather than as a relation of domination (Shrewsbury, 1987: 9). Empowered students find their own voices and discover their own authenticity while at the same time respecting the power, voices and authenticity of others. Being empowered enhances both autonomy and mutuality, and recognizes our abilities to respect and to find communion with others.

Leadership within a feminist classroom requires an embodiedness of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs, while finding honorable connections between our needs and the needs of others (Shrewsbury, 1987: 11). Effective leaders are also effective followers, as they understand the moral and ethical nature of choices within a community and the necessity for empowerment and agency of all communal members. In such a classroom we build on the experiences of each other, see our experiences in different lights, relate our

experiences to other and new understandings, and come to think about our experiences in different ways (Shrewsbury, 1987: 6-7).

The practices of community, empowerment and leadership that I facilitate in my classroom are very similar to the ways in which I interact with my son at home and to the ways in which the self-identified feminist mothers involved in my Ph.D. research engage with their children.

Feminist mothering and feminist pedagogy

In the late 1990s, I interviewed 16, self-identified feminist mothers who lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada about the interconnection of their feminism and mothering. I discovered that feminism advises the parenting philosophies and practices of these women and, conversely, that their mothering shapes their understanding and practice of feminism. I also found that these mothers practice a number of feminist teaching strategies while living with and raising their children. For instance, they teach their children about various forms of domination and oppression—especially those related to gender, ethnicity, race, geographic location, class, age, ability and sexuality—and the ways in which they intersect people's lives.⁴ They also participate in the feminist pedagogical practice of raising thought provoking questions and facilitating organized and focussed discussions that immerse their children in critical thinking.⁵

These mothers clearly partake in what theorist bell hooks (1988: 51) describes as a feminist pedagogy that engages people “in a learning process that makes the world ‘more real than less real’... [and] work[s] to dispel the notion that our experience is not a ‘real world’ experience.” In addition, they often exercise other strategies common to feminist pedagogy, such as developing egalitarian relationships with their children that foster collaborative learning, nourish empowerment and self-governance, and advance collective action.⁶

This discovery—that feminist mothers practice several components of feminist pedagogy—was a significant moment in my understanding of the interconnectedness of feminist mothering and feminist teaching. Feminist pedagogy is clearly not limited to the confines of the teacher/student relationship or to the classroom. Feminist pedagogy is obviously practiced in the home through the interpersonal relations feminist mothers have with their children. This epiphany lead me to wonder if feminist mothers who are teachers draw on aspects of their parenting when interacting with students in educational settings.

Attentive love through maternal practice: Preservation, growth and acceptability

To foster growth is to sponsor or nurture a child's unfolding, expanding material spirit—whatever in a child is lively, purposive and responsive. (Ruddick, 1989: 82)

Today I understand that when I honored and facilitated my young son's wishes to wear his hair in an unconventional way as a child in kindergarten, I was practicing what Sara Ruddick (1989) calls "attentive love"—the combination of my cognitive capacity for attention and my human ability to love. While the attention practiced in attentive love by a mother is "akin to the capacity for empathy, the ability to suffer or celebrate with another as if in the other's experience you know and find yourself," it also endeavors to see the other accurately rather than to see oneself in the other (Ruddick, 1989: 121). These acts of attentive love "strengthen a love that does not clutch at or cling to the beloved" but, rather, lets the beloved grow (Ruddick, 1989: 122).

As a mother responsible for caring for her child, I am continuously engaged in what Ruddick (1989: 17) calls the maternal work of preservative love, nurturance and training.⁷ I recognize that my son, like others, lives a complicated life and that his mind and psyche need persistent nurturance and attention. My respect for my five-year-old son's need to wear his hair in a way that was true to his sense of self meant that I navigated the social pressure placed on me, as his mother, and on him, as a young boy. I attempted to do this in a way that would safeguard and foster his positive self-development and self-esteem. It also demanded that I question the well-meant requirements of social acceptability placed on us by our family, friends and community, while at the same time negotiating our acceptance within these social groups.⁸ My attention to my son's well-being continues to be a simultaneous act of knowing and loving (Ruddick, 1989:120).

So, what's love got to do with feminist pedagogy?

Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all dimensions of love—"care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge"—in our everyday lives. We can successfully do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn. (bell hooks, 2000: 94)

Loving children, not by possessing or manipulating them but by acknowledging and welcoming their reality, argues Ruddick, is central to "the patient loving eye of attention" often practiced by mothers (1989: 122). Thinking about my teaching experiences of the past thirteen years, I realize that I often use this type of attention in my interaction with students. The patient loving eye of attention that I have developed as a mother meshes easily with my feminist teaching in the classroom. I find that I engage with students in ways that are similar to how I interact with my son. In both cases it feels reflexive and appropriate to listen attentively to what I am being told, to appreciate where feelings and stories are coming from, and to support the will of the person who is sharing a part of herself or himself with me. I respect the knowledge that is

being shared with me and I am committed to “nurture the unfolding, expanding material spirit” within each human being that Ruddick defines as essential to maternal thinking (1989: 57).

The synthesis of attentive love and feminist pedagogy in my university teaching appears to not only mirror elements of my relationship with my son, but to also echo what other feminist mothers have told me they practice in their parenting. My research findings show that feminist mothers engage the patient loving eye of attention as they concurrently treat their children with love and respect and educate their children to think critically about themselves, others and the world around them. They not only cultivate an awareness and value for diversity and community affiliation, they also foster an environment where autonomy and leadership are esteemed and practiced. In their commitment to exercising a love that does not clutch or cling, feminist mothers enable their children to grow as individuals in their own right. Feminists foster empowerment and self-governance in their children as they engage in the maternal work of ensuring the preservation, growth and acceptance of their children.

Although scholars addressing the principles and practice of feminist pedagogy have not directly addressed love in their discourse, other feminist thinkers have considered the importance of love in writings pertaining to political activism and liberatory education.⁹ For instance, feminist theorist Marilyn Frye (1983), in *The Politics of Reality*, articulates the need for a “science of the loving eye” which allows for and demands a plurality of experiences and subjective knowledge (76). According to Frye, the loving eye, which presupposes embodied knowledge and independence, “knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known” (1983: 6). Rather than blindly adhering to and submitting to the ideas, ideals and knowledge of others and ourselves, the loving eye allows for critical reflection and the creation of new meanings for ourselves and for others. The loving eye, as I understand and have described here, appears to be central to the practice of feminist pedagogy which is practiced by feminist mothers in their relationships with their children and by feminist teachers, such as myself, in their relationships with students.

Feminist critic and scholar, bell hooks, addresses the importance of love in a recent trilogy on the subject.¹⁰ In her first book, *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks (2000) notes that love—revealed through the acts of care, respect, knowing and assuming responsibility—lays “the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers” (144). The goal of developing community within the feminist classroom, where learning and teaching can take place in an environment that simultaneously respects diversity and autonomy is supported by a love ethic that, according to hooks (2000:88), insists that “we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness and personal integrity” need to be expressed in all of our everyday interactions with people.

In the last volume of the trilogy, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*,

hooks addresses the need for love and solidarity among women. She claims that in restoring love to its rightful place—at the centre of our lives—we can “create loving bonds, circles of love that nurture and sustain collective female well-being” (2002: xix). The goal of creating loving bonds where the well-being of individuals are nurtured and sustained, parallels one of the fundamental goals of feminist mothering and feminist pedagogy. The well-being of children is essential to the maternal work of nurturing children, while the well-being of students is integral to creating a liberatory classroom where feminist pedagogy can blossom and where students can learn.

I believe that love can be entwined with feminist mothering and with the philosophy and practice of feminist pedagogy. Although the evidence presented here may be considered sparse, I believe that elements of an ‘ethic of love,’ as proposed by hooks, and components of ‘the loving eye,’ as theorized by Frye, are found in both feminist mothering and feminist pedagogy. I am more convinced by my own experiences and by the experiences of other feminist mothers, that the act of ‘attentive love’ that is intrinsic to the maternal work of raising children is experienced by feminist mothers who are feminist teachers in the classroom. I believe that feminist mothers who are teachers draw on what they know about loving their children as they engage with students. I believe that love also assists them to critically examine their own actions to see what is needed, so that they can, as hooks (2002: 94) posits, “give care, be responsible, show respect and indicate a willingness to learn” as they work within the feminist classroom.

This paper is only the starting point for theorizing around a maternal-feminist pedagogy that is informed by love. I encourage readers to not only reflect upon what I have proposed here, but to also delve into further discussion regarding the role of love in teaching and how this may play a role in feminist pedagogy.

¹For further discussion of the practicalist philosophical view, see Ruddick (1989). Belenky et. al. (1987) present various ways in which women develop distinctive ways of knowing out of their personal lived experiences in *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

²I am indebted to Debra Dudek for the rich conversation that helped me clarify this understanding.

³This decision was not made by me alone, rather, it was made with my partner and the father of our child.

⁴For further discussion of this aspect of feminist pedagogy, see: Briskin (1992); hooks (1988, 1994); Spelman (1985) and Washington (1985).

⁵See, for example: Briskin (1992); hooks (1988, 1994); Hughes (1996).

⁶Carolyn Shrewsbury (1987) speaks to these three components of feminist pedagogy, as do bell hooks (1994), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992), and Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetrault (1994).

⁷The motherwork of preservation, nurturance and growth differ for women depending on their social location. For example, Black feminist theorist and sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) mothers emphasizes the importance Black mothers place on teaching their children self-definition, self-reliance and the necessity of demanding respect from others due to the realities of living in a racist society. Without these skills, Black children are unable to survive the sexist, racist and class-biased society in which they live. Raising children with a political consciousness can assist in the development of self-assured and self-reliant children.

⁸Again, I must acknowledge that my partner and I were in full agreement with supporting the right of my son to make choices about his appearance that fit with his sense of self.

⁹See, for example, Frye (1983) Rose (1994). Ruddick (1983) also addresses the importance of love in understanding and working toward a politics of peace.

¹⁰These include: *All About Love: New Visions* (2000); *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001); and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002).

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